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ABSTRACT

To assist the Illinois Basic Skills Program, the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association (ISTA) developed a task force that offered the state assistance in (1) facilitating oral communication learning in Illinois schools with an emphasis upon the utilization of existing school programs and staff; (2) developing a plan for a systematic approach to oral communication instruction in Illinois schools; (3) developing means by which the learning of oral communication skills could be shared in both the school and the home environment; and (4) identifying and training professional consultants. The ISTA task force focused its attention first on the problem of determining which communication skills should be presented in Illinois schools. The task force next completed a brochure on basic oral communication skills that was printed by the Illinois State Board of Education for distribution as part of the board's continuing public awareness activities and developed another brochure for use by parents to be distributed through local parent-teacher organizations. The task force also began work on a document that addressed the assessment of basic oral communication skills. Additional plans call for the development of a model training workshop format. (HOD)

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BASIC ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS:
A REPORT ON THE ILLINOIS TASK FORCE

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BASIC ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS:
A REPORT ON THE ILLINOIS TASK FORCE

Professional educators in speech communication have preached for many years that oral communication behavior affects how people think, how we interact, and how we react, and that such behavior is directly related to the development of such other skills as reading, writing, and the learning process itself. Because oral communication is such a complex and fundamental behavior, speech communication educators believe it deserves continuous and focused attention in our schools. Unfortunately, from our perspective, school teachers and administrators haved not shared these convictions, and most of us, frequently, have felt the frustrations of not being understood or accepted as representing a significant academic profession. In the past few years, however, a number of events have occurred which are giving us a boost in our efforts including federal basic skills legislation, the Speech Communication Association task force projects on communication competencies and model programs, and cooperative activities between state office of education personnel and state speech associations. This article is a report on these activities, particularly the cooperative programs developed by the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association with the Illinois State Board of Education. Although the Illinois programs may only have impact, immediately, within the state, similar projects could be undertaken in any state with beneficial results for the profession.

In 1978, the Congress of the United States gave impetus to our efforts to improve speech communication education in the schools by enacting legislation to assist in the development of programs designed to bring about an emphasis on basic skills education. This legislation, Public Law 95-561 (a new Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965),[1] provided regulations for three additional components to the 1965 Act. These three components included (1) National Basic Skills Improvement, (2) State Basic Skills Improvement, and (3) Educational Proficiency. For the purposes of the amendment (and most significantly for speech communication educators), basic skills were defined as mathematics, reading, and oral and written communication.

The National Basic Skills Improvement component of the 1978 amendment called for the creation of three programs: Basic Skills Improvement in the Schools, the Parent Participation Program (to assist projects which enlist parents and volunteers in teaching basic skills to children), and the Out-of-School Basic Skills Improvement Program. Each state was to provide for a Formula Grant Program through which federal funds were to be subgranted for activities which promote the state basic skills plan and for a State Leadership Program through which the state agencies could carry out their own leadership activities in basic skills education. The Education Proficiency component (not funded) provided for a Proficiency Standards Program and an Achievement Testing Program.

On the federal level this amendment to the 1965 Act broadened (replaced) the national Right to Read Program which was due to be phased out by 1980. Consequently, many of the personnel associated with the Right to Read Program were given the responsibility for implementing the provisions of the Basic Skills amendment.

Fortunately for speech communication educators, during the time period in which the Title II amendment was being formulated, the Speech Communication Association was concluding the National Project on Speech Communication Competencies begun in 1973 with a grant from the Axe-Houghton Foundation.[2] The SCA was fortunate also to have as Director of Education Research, Carolyn M. Del-Polito, who assisted in efforts to ensure that oral communication competencies were included in the national definition of basic skills.

That few on the national level or in the individual states were prepared or knowledgable about oral communication skills, however, soon became obvious. Ms. Del Polito reported in the June 1980 issue of Spectra (SCA newsletter) that

> 1. Very few of the . . . proposals /for federal basic skills grants/ addressed oral communication as a basic skill.
> 2. Of the few which included oral communication, some included it as a by-product of or as a compliment to either writing or reading programs.[3]

In one of the proposals submitted, for example, a school district reported that there was no need to address the oral communication

skills component as the students in that district already "knew how to talk."

In the same article in Spectra Ms. Del Polito goes on to state that

> Those educators who recognize the importance of oral communication in the development and enhancement of their students' reading, writing, and problem-solving skills do not have the expertise to implement effective oral communication programs, nor do they realize speech communication experts exist to assist them.[4]

The Illinois Basic Skills Program

The State of Illinois was no exception even though 90% of Illinois high schools offer a basic course in speech, and during the past decade, "the percentage of schools requiring speech for graduation has increased by over one-third."[5] Following the precedent of the national agency most states assigned responsibility for the implementation of state basic skills programs to Right to Read personnel. The Director of the Illinois Basic Skills Leadership Program is Ms. Carolyn Farrar, who had served the state earlier as Director of the Right to Read Program. Ms. Farrar and the other three educational consultants who comprise the primary staff for the Illinois Basic Skills Program are associated with the Program Planning and Development Section of the Illinois State Board of Education. This staff established two regional, leadership seminars to be followed by a series of workshops to be held throughout the state. Announcements about requests for funding for grants from state flow-through monies

were issued and a group to read proposals was established.

During the first of the two regional, leadership seminars questions from participants led Ms. Farrar to the realization that additional assistance would be needed to better define and clarify the nature of oral communication skills. She turned to Mina Halliday, Speech and Theatre consultant for the Illinois State Board of Education, who arranged for a meeting with representative members of the Board of Directors of the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association. As a result of that meeting ISTA agreed to work cooperatively with the state basic skills staff and established an ISTA Basic Oral Communication Skills Task Force.[6]

The ISTA Basic Skills Task Force convened on April 10, 1980, at the annual Central States Speech Association convention held in Chicago. Task Force members agreed at this meeting to prepare and submit a proposal for funding to be submitted to the state basic skills staff. This proposal stipulated that

1. The Illinois Speech and Theatre Association would assist in facilitating oral communication learning in Illinois schools with an emphasis upon the utilization of existing school programs and staff. (This stipulation has been instrumental in bringing about acceptance of ISTA recommendations. Basic oral communication skills are presented, consistently, as basic tools for learning and not as additional subject areas imposed on teachers nor requiring employment of new school personnel).

2. ISTA would develop a plan for a systematic approach to oral communication instruction in Illinois schools. This plan

would address those problems identified by the Illinois Problems Index (needs assessment is a key criterion in both the national and state basic skills programs).

3. ISTA would assist in developing means by which the learning of oral communication skills could be shared in both the school and the home environments.

4. ISTA would identify and train professional consultants and assist in coordinating their contributions to Illinois schools.

The state basic skills staff accepted the ISTA Basic Skills Task Force proposal and agreed (1) to fund all costs for printing and distributing materials, (2) to provide task force meeting facilities, and (3) to reimburse task force members for travel, lodging, and meal expenses incurred during their planning and work sessions. Professional consultants were to be listed as consultants for the Illinois State Board of Education and reimbursed according to State Board guidelines.

Planning Sequence Document. The ISTA Task Force focused its attention first on the problem of determining which communication skills should be presented to Illinois schools. The national basic skills program focused attention on the need for systematic instruction in oral communication throughout the school curriculum, from pre-school through grade 12. Traditionally, in Illinois schools oral communication has been taught primarily at the secondary level as a performance activity such as public speaking, debate, and theatre. The emphasis on basic skills instruction, however, has as its purpose to help each child develop

those communication skills that are basic to all academic subject areas including helping the student learn to cope with problems and feelings, to contribute effectively to individual and group efforts, and to assume responsibility for decision-making. Consequently, the Basic Oral Communication Skills Task Force agreed that the most important need for Illinois schools was a planning document which would stress skills that could be developed sequentially in a variety of subject areas in addition to the traditional speech class.

The Speech Communication Association National Project on Speech Communication Competencies report[7] represents both a fairly thorough review of our knowledge of children's communication competencies and a national model for developing instructional programs. The ISTA Task Force believed it was appropriate and practical to base the Illinois planning document on the national model. However, testimony from school teachers, particularly those on the elementary level, suggested that the SCA guidelines lacked specificity. Teachers felt unable to translate these guidelines into a working set of communication skills which would form a basis for classroom instruction. The Illinois planning document, therefore, is drawn from the SCA report but with a degree of specificity not present in that report.

The SCA report categorizes competencies in terms of functional communication acts and general communication competencies. Functional acts include communication for control, for feeling, for informing, for ritualizing, and for imagining. Competencies,

then, were categorized according to how people put language to work for themselves including (1) enlarging their repertoire of communication acts, (2) selecting criteria for making choices from the repertoire, (3) implementing the communication acts chosen, and (4) evaluating the effectiveness of communiction employed.[8]

The ISTA planning document focuses on the communication competence categories, although the task force did identify specific skills to ensure that functional areas were adequately covered. The category system finally adopted by the Illinois group includes

1.0 In order to communicate effectively students must experience a wide variety of communicative situations. These include
  1.1 Intrapersonal situations (skills focused on perceptions, thinking, feelings, self-concepts, etc.)
  1.2 Interpersonal situations (including conversations, interviews, personal relationships, negotiations)
  1.3 Group situations (skills used in interacting with families, friends, committees, clubs)
  1.4 Public situations (speeches, plays, debates, readings)
  1.5 Media situations (radio, television, film)
2.0 In order to communicate effectively students must learn to analyze communicative messages appropriately. Such analysis should focus upon
  2.1 People
  2.2 Topics
  2.3 Settings
  2.4 Purposes

3.0 In order to communicate effectively students must develop appropriate communication strategies. These strategies include
- 3.1 Information gathering
- 3.2 Organization
- 3.3 Language clarity and style
- 3.4 Physical and vocal expression
- 3.5 Feedback

4.0 In order to communicate effectively students must develop the ability to evaluate messages. This evaluation usually considers
- 4.1 Communication impact
- 4.2 Evaluation criteria (such as timeliness, length, relevance, aesthetics, ethics, etc.) [9]

The skills listed in each category are intended to serve as a basis for planning specific school programs according to the needs of each community and school district. The intent was to provide a general structure for sequential instruction in five grade-level categories: pre-school, kindergarten through grade three, grades four through six, grades seven through nine, and grades ten through twelve. For example, category 3.2, Organization, included skill listings for each grade grouping such as the following:

Preschool: parents and teachers should talk with children about such grouping characteristics as size, quantity, etc.

Kindergarten-grade three: children should be introduced to the concept of logical relationships such as time and place relationships.

Grades four-six: students should begin to produce basic message outlines.

Grades seven-nine: students should develop the ability to produce content syntheses and full outlines.

Grades ten-twelve: students should be able to identify differing organizational patterns and construct detailed outlines.

The planning document consistently stresses that the skills listed should not be considered required skills for a specific age group but as a guide to those skills which can be addressed appropriately within a range of ages. Nor was every student to be expected necessarily to master every skill within the indicated grade levels. The Task Force also points out that to develop and implement a K-12 Basic Oral Communication Skills Program each school district would have to develop the program in the existing structure of the curriculum. In many cases in the State of Illinois, establishment of a comprehensive K-12 program would also require inter-district cooperation. The Illinois document not only lists basic skills but also includes example classroom activities and sources for additional exercises and activities.

Public Awareness Program. In addition to the ISTA Planning Sequence document the Task Force has completed a brochure on Basic Oral Communication Skills to be printed by the Illinois State Board of Education for distribution as a part of the Board's continuing public awareness activities. Also, a graduate student in broadcasting at Northern Illinois University is preparing scripts and sample tapes for consideration for a series of audio

and television public service announcements. Other Task Force members are developing programs to acquaint elementary school teachers with basic oral communication skills, articles on basic skills in the ISTA newsletter, and a series of convention programs for other professional groups such as state reading councils, state associations for teachers of English, etc.

In-Home Education Program. The national basic skills program calls for special attention to "out-of-school" activities such as programs designed to assist parents in their efforts to aid their children in learning basic skills. As part of its parent education program the ISTA Task Force has completed a brochure for use by parents which the State Board of Education is also printing for distribution through local parent-teacher organizations. The Task Force is now focusing its attention on the preparation of a proposal for Parent Workshops to be conducted in cooperation with interested school districts.

Assessment Document. The ISTA Task Force has begun a document on the assessment of basic oral communication skills in grades K-12 as a companion publication to the planning sequence document. ISTA has asked the subgroup working on this document to investigate as well the preparation of oral communication skills measurement devices to be used as a part of the testing program for the Illinois Inventory of Educational Progress.

Consultant Training Program. The last project of the ISTA Task Force being worked on at this time is the establishment of

a program for the training of basic oral communication skills consultants to work with teachers in local school districts on planning and implementing a basic oral communication skills program within the district. Tentative plans call for the development of a model training workshop format with the first workshop to be held early in the fall of 1981. Future projects include models for incorporating basic oral communication skills instruction in teacher training programs in Illinois institutions of higher learning, studies of basic oral communication skills at the college level, and a study of the impact of task force activities on Illinois schools.

Conclusion. At the present time most students receive very little formal training in oral communication skills in public and private schools. The belief persists that since children enter school "knowing how to talk" schools need not reallocate precious resources to new courses or programs in speech communication. On the other hand, teachers, parents, and employers, increasingly recognize and accept the notion that students with highly developed oral communication skills are frequently better students and employees. The time may be at hand for the recognition that (1) oral communication skills are fundamental to human interaction, (2) to function effectively every person must be able to transmit and receive messages with accuracy and clarity, (3) oral communication involves a systematic and sequential set of skills which can be taught, and (4) the skills involved need more than casual attention in our schools.

Public Law 95-561 has provided communication educators with an opportunity to develop programs for focusing attention in schools on oral communication instruction. The model developed for the State of Illinois by the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association is one way to begin focusing that attention and addressing the needs of the public schools. The Illinois experience, however, is only a beginning and guarantees no immediate or dramatic breakthroughs in acceptance by teachers, administrators, or boards of education.

The success of the Illinois program is based on a number of factors which may be crucial also for other state associations attempting to develop and implement similar programs. These factors include

1. A state speech association willing to make a commitment to basic oral communication skills education. For example, after completion of the Basic Oral Communication Skills Planning Sequence Document, the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association Board of Directors formally commited the association to a continuing interest in basic oral communication skills education by reorganizing the Task Force into a standing committee on speech education. This move not only represented a commitment but permits long-range planning activities to occur.

Not only is the support of the state speech association important for the development of basic skills programs but there are also many advantages to the state speech association itself including (1) opportunities to focus activities of members on

an important area of professional concern, (2) generation of interest among membership across several levels of education, and (3) increased recognition as a contributing professional organization among state educational personnel, teachers, and school administrators.

2. A person in a position of authority in the state office of education who believes that oral communication skills are important. Such a person need not be, necessarily, a speech person. Frequently, those with backgrounds and/or interests in reading, the arts, and language arts are supportive of oral communication education, particularly at the elementary level.

3. A group of persons affiliated with the state speech association who are willing to commit their time to the program. These persons, ideally, should include (1) a college level speech education professor who will focus his/her professional research activities on basic skills for two to four years, (2) an elementary teacher who works in a system which will support professional activities and who has "connections" in various parts of the state, and (3) a high school teacher interested in a comprehensive program of basic oral communication skills education as well as his/her specific speech courses. Additionally, you not only need persons in leadership positions but also a number of responsible, back-up people on the committee to permit approriate subgroup activities.

4. Support from either the state speech association or the state office of education for the travel expenses of the group

and for the publication and duplication of materials. Support should be given not only for travel, lodging, meals, etc., but in the case of public school teachers, reimbursement to the district for hiring substitute teachers will greatly enhance the opportunities for teachers to participate.

5. Strong relationships to various agencies, such as the support of respected school administrators, acceptance by state reading councils and English teacher associations, as well as membership on key committees. For example, in Illinois the Director of the Basic Oral Communication Skills projects for ISTA is also a member of the Basic Skills Advisory Council to the Illinois State Board of Education.

In any case, state speech associations should actively become involved in the basic oral communication skills movement. As Carolyn M. Del Polito stated

> To enhance the oral communication abilities of our children and youth, and to promote oral communication as basic to their future career and social success, educators in Basic Skills will require new roles, new knowledge, and new access to resources. The future of oral communication as a basic skill will depend upon (a) the effectiveness of professionals, like yourselves, to vocally support oral communication instruction in your schools and your legislatures, (b) the ability of speech communication researchers to provide answers to the many communication skills questions posed by teachers, parents, and administrators alike, and (c) the willingness of specialists and non-specialists to adapt the old and well-respected disciplines of speech communication to the needs of learners living in a complex and rapidly changing society.[10]

Notes

[1]Public Law 95-561, November 1, 1978, 92 Stat.2201. Federal Register, Volume 44 (April 27, 1979), 25148-25153.

[2]Allen, R. R., and Kenneth L. Brown, Developing Communication Competence in Children: A Report of the Speech Communication Association's National Project on Speech Communication Competencies (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1976).

[3]Carolyn M. Del Polito, "Issues in Basic Skills: Do They Affect You?" Spectra (Speech Communication Association, June, 1981), page 6.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Leslie Wilson, et al, "A Survey of Speech Competence in the Secondary Schools of Illinois," (an unpublished report prepared under the auspices of the Illinois State University Alumni Research Fund, 1978).

[6]Task Force members included
Dr. Philip A. Gray, Chair, Northern Illinois Univ.
Dr. Pamela Cooper, Northwestern University
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Mina Halliday, State Board of Education Office of Program Planning and Development
Maxine Joyce, Macomb High School
Dr. John Sharpham, Illinois State University
Joann Tuttle, Marca Grade School
Bud Williams, Wheaton North High School and ISTA President

[7]Allen and Brown, Developing Communication Competence in Children.

[8]Barbara Sundene Wood, Development of Functional Communication Competencies: Pre-K-Grade 6, and Grades 7-12. TRIP Booklets, ERIC Clearinghouse and Speech Communication Association, 5105 Backlick Road, Annendale, Virginia, 1977.

[9]Dr. Philip A. Gray, et al, Basic Oral Communication Skills: A Planning Sequence for Illinois Schools, Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association, 1981.

[10]Carolyn M. Del Polito, "Improving Oral Communication Instruction: A Reaction," (paper presented at the National Basic Skills Orientation Conference, Arlington, Virginia, September 21-24, 1980.)